

NOTES ON BOOKS AND WORK.

LORD ROSEBERY has given his opinion against the removal of the rate limit of a penny in the pound imposed by the Libraries Act, and, if correctly reported, he even thinks there is virtue in restricting the amount to a penny. How much depends upon the point of view! If Lord Rosebery were an assistant in a large public library, with a salary of eighty pounds per annum, he would probably take a different view of the question. He would know then how little attraction there is for good men in a service which has no prizes, very few tolerable salaries, and an exacting and critical public to satisfy.

This question of the rate limit needs to be looked into carefully in the public interest. Criticism of the work of libraries has been in fashion of late years. The shortcomings, or supposed shortcomings, have been the theme of newspapers and magazines. But in no instance that I have seen have the critics found out the root of the defects in the present public library system. Librarians are not graduates of universities, says one critic; you circulate too many cheap books which people ought to buy for themselves, says another; the average library employee is incapable of giving intelligent help to the

readers, says a third; you buy second-hand instead of new, says the publisher; and so it goes on.

Now what does this all come to but an admission that the amount of money available is insufficient to buy books, and to pay salaries which will attract more efficient officers. The marvel is that with such inadequate financial resources so much has been done. Indeed, were it not for liberal donations of money for books and buildings, and much gratuitous service given by friendly citizens, the story of the public libraries in England would be very different. This voluntary help has, however, given rise to an unfortunate error. The public library is looked upon as a kind of philanthropic effort, a place where books are supplied free, just as medicines are distributed to the out-patients of a hospital.

The basis of a rate-supported library is that of a co-operative effort on the part of a community to provide something which very few individuals, even if they have the inclination, are in a position to provide for themselves. It is not necessary that every contributor to the cost should directly make use of the library in order to benefit. A storehouse of ideas and learning from which supplies may be drawn by those engaged in informing the community, whether journalists, preachers, teachers, lecturers, or whatever else, is a benefit to all in the long run.

A writer in the 'Atlantic Monthly' for December, discussing the question of the excessive

circulation of fiction by public libraries suggests that libraries should make it a rule never to buy a novel until it is a year old. Nobody could complain, says the writer, for it is open to anybody to buy a book at once if he thinks it worth having. The plan here suggested is, I think, actually practised at the London Library, St. James's Square, and it was in practice, though not perhaps in theory, carried out by the public libraries of England and Wales in the days of the three volume novel. When new novels were published at 31s. 6d., they were practically never bought by private individuals or by public libraries, and depended entirely for their sale upon the large subscription libraries. Public libraries only bought such novels as displayed sufficient life to be reprinted in single volume form. There was, in fact, under the old system an automatic weeding out of the unfit. The floods of new novels issued, now that the cost of production is comparatively small, makes it almost imperative that something should be done to prevent the loading up of our shelves with useless rubbish.

The proposal to limit the purchases to those novels which survive a year has many points in its favour. It practically means a return to the conditions of the three volume days. Those who want the newest books would have to purchase or hire them, the public funds being reserved for the purchase of less ephemeral books. Our shelves would be less occupied with dead stock in the shape of forgotten novels which had a vogue only so long as the publishers puffed them. The public libraries

would not be criticised for too much support of ephemeral fiction, nor would the publishers complain that libraries interfered with their sales—I don't think libraries do, but the publishers are always saying so, and it is probable that this grumble would only give place to some other; but let that happen as it may, the libraries would be better off without the bulk of the novels now rushed into the market by speculative publishers, or, too often, at their writers' risk.

In 'The Library' for July, 1903, appeared a note on the difficulty of getting a fair amount of work out of the novels of to-day because of the poor paper used and the way in which everything is cut to reduce the cost of production. Things are even worse now than when that note was written. A new book by one of the most popular writers of the day, just published, is a glaring example. It comes from a different house to the writer's former books. As a book it is not up to the writer's form, and not nearly so good as his other books, all issued at three shillings and sixpence. To balance matters, I suppose, the new publisher prints it upon poor spongy paper, illustrates it in a feeble way, gives less reading to the page, and issues it at six shillings. Now this writer's public is a three and sixpenny public, and he writes three and sixpenny books. I think the publishing house referred to has over-reached itself, and I shall be very much surprised to hear that the book has been sold out and a reprint called for. Here, clearly, is a case where the libraries would do well to wait a year. By that time

the book will be off the market at six shillings, and copies will be going at about eighteen pence in second-hand lists, which is about the value for wear and tear and for reading of the book referred to. These short-measure books must be taken into account. The most casual reader would get through a modern novel in a couple of days—a much larger number of books must therefore be kept to supply the demand. There is a fine chance for a publisher who will bring out well printed editions upon good paper, of books which have run the gauntlet of the circulating libraries and survived. The series could be gradually extended to include a large number of books out of copyright, still sold steadily to libraries and to the public. There would be no need to cut the price. If for five shillings a librarian could procure a book which would stand the work of three or even two of the books now available he would invariably give the preference to the book with good paper, fair measure, and tried literature. For some time past I have steadily refused to buy novels printed on poor paper. The subscription libraries in the town have drawn off some of our readers in consequence—but what of that? We still have more work to do than we can get round satisfactorily, and if the ground is cleared a little for the more serious readers, well, we count that a gain.

The depreciation in the get-up of books is unfortunately spreading to works of reference, and is becoming, therefore, a serious matter. I have before me the first four volumes of a standard work

of reference, practically indispensable in every library, public or private. It is from one of the best publishing houses, a firm which has done much to support the modern revival in printing. Yet this book is turned out in anything but a creditable manner. The paper is wretched pulpy stuff, the binding is flimsy, the printing is not very good, and a large number of full-page illustrations in half tone have been introduced. The previous edition in two volumes was not illustrated, and to introduce such illustrations into a work of this calibre is offensive.

Another instance is also before me of a valuable work of reference in one volume, where the new edition is so bad that it feels like a book compounded of pressed sawdust, while the former edition is like holding a piece of polished mahogany.

J. B.

The new volume (the eighteenth) of Mr. Slater's 'Book-Prices Current' (Elliot Stock) is as interesting and indispensable as any of its predecessors. Mr. Slater still turns a deaf ear to our oft-repeated plea that when the prices of books are entirely or mainly determined by their printing or binding, the names of their printers or binders should be given in his index. It is clear that he cares very little for books of this class, and his notes on them are unimportant and mostly taken from the sale catalogues, from which they repeat mistakes. Of modern books, on the other hand, Mr. Slater has a very considerable knowledge, and what he writes about first editions of Burns or Scott, Keats or Shelley, Thackeray or Dickens, is always worth reading. From the book-